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ABSTRACT

The study focused on problems that Finnish learners of English (NNS) encounter with epistemic modality in conversational interaction with native speakers of English (NS). Epistemic modality refers to modal expressions that convey the speaker's commitment to the truth of the propositions he is expressing (e.g., "surely he understands..."). Data were drawn from 48 simulated task-oriented conversations between an NNS and an NS. It was hypothesized that epistemic modality has a bearing on the rhetorical force of the utterance, therefore having a strategic function in discourse. It was found difficult to apply a modified speech-act approach to data analysis, so the unit of analysis was extended to a sequence of discourse in which a face-threatening issue arose and was discussed, and at least a preliminary agreement was reached. Occurrence and co-occurrence of epistemic items were examined in these sequences. Three types of strategic functions for epistemic modality were discerned: on-the-record and conventionalized, as a politeness strategy; off- or on-the-record, as a face-saving strategy; and off-the-record, as a persuasion and manipulation strategy. It was found that NNSs use fewer epistemic expressions and favor different types than do NSs. Pedagogical implications are discussed. (MSE)

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Modality as a Strategy in Interaction: Epistemic Modality in the Language of Native and Non-Native Speakers of English

Elise Kärkkäinen

This paper forms part of a larger study (Kärkkäinen 1991) which focused not so much on second-language learners and language learning but, rather, on examining the semantic system of modality from the point of view of discourse analysis and pragmatics, and for the most part in a cross-cultural body of data. I outlined the functions of primarily epistemic modality in conversational interaction between native speakers of English and advanced Finnish university students of English. Thus, the inspiration for the study came from linguistics, "if only from difficulties within linguistics", as Stubbs (1983, p. 67) puts it, as it seems very obvious that modality is an aspect of language that has not been adequately captured by syntactic or semantic theories. However, due to the nature of the corpus data, I also acquired a great deal of information on the problems that Finnish learners of English encounter in this area of language use, and I will here concentrate on that aspect of my study.

THE DATA

I analyzed epistemic modality in a body of data collected in the Department of English, University of Oulu, during 1985-1988 in the Contrastive (Finnish/ English) Discourse Analysis Project carried out under the guidance of Professor Heikki Nyyssönen.

The empirical design followed in broad outline the approach by Edmondson et al (1984). Our corpus consisted of 48 simulated task-oriented conversations between a Finnish student of English (NNS) and a native speaker of English (NS) (approx. 7 hours and some 75,000 words). The conversations involved a problem or a delicate issue that had to be brought up by one of the participants, and it was hoped that some kind of agreement would be reached on it in the course of the interaction. A number of Finnish-Finnish and English-English recordings were also made for comparison.

Despite the fact that they were simulations, we were very happy with the resulting conversations, since the participants themselves rated them as fairly natural or natural in almost all cases. This may have been mainly due to the fact that, besides carefully preparing the participants and trying to make the situation as relaxed as possible, the test persons were left on their own in the room during the actual recording (Kärkkäinen and Raudaskoski 1988).

EPISTEMIC MODALITY – FROM SEMANTICS TO PRAGMATICS

Epistemic modality refers to modal expressions that convey the speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed by him/her. This may refer to how certain the speaker feels about the content of his/her utterance or how likely he/she thinks it is, but also in some cases to a process of inference made by the speaker (Palmer 1986, p. 51, Lyons 1977, p. 797, Westney 1986, p. 311 etc.). In spoken interaction linguistic categories expressing epistemic modality include modal auxiliaries, modal adverbs, modal lexical verbs, parenthetical clauses and, to a lesser extent, modal adjectives and nouns.

When it comes to semantic accounts of the linguistic items that serve to express modality in English, it has been surprisingly common to concentrate on modality only as it is signalled by the English modal verbs or modals (this has been done by Twaddell 1965, Ehrman 1966, Boyd and Thorne 1969, Bouma 1975, Hermerén 1978, Palmer 1979, and Coates 1983, for example). This is understandable in view of the fact that, because the modals are more integrated within the structure of the clause than other modal expressions, they are considered to be more central in the system (Perkins 1983, p. 104).

The **ambiguity** of modal expressions has become apparent in many of the semantic studies named above: modal items, especially modal verbs, may express a multitude of meanings. In addition to being capable of expressing both subjective and objective types of meaning, a single modal verb may have both an epistemic meaning and a non-epistemic (or root) meaning, or even several non-epistemic meanings. What is more, it may have these meanings simultaneously, inside one and the same utterance, that is, it may be **indeterminate** between two meanings. The latter phenomenon has not usually been accounted for in semantic analyses, even though Palmer draws attention briefly to the difficulty of distinguishing discrete and clear categories (Palmer 1979, pp. 172-178). Coates (1983), however, proposes a fuzzy set theory to account for the indeterminacy of modal verb meanings. (Hers, incidentally, is one of the few semantic approaches that is actually based on corpus data, including also spoken English.) She claims that a modal verb may, for one thing, be ambiguous, that is, it may not be possible to decide which of two meanings is intended; a modal may be ambiguous even between an epistemic and a non-epistemic meaning, as in the following:

> He *must* understand that we mean business. (= (Epistemic) 'Surely he understands that we mean business' or (Root) 'It is essential that he understand that we mean business') (p. 16)

It is, however, very likely that in many (if by no means all) cases the examination of an utterance in context would enable the hearer to exclude one of the interpretations. But what is more significant in Coates's model is that it allows a modal also to be indeterminate (in Coates's terms, a merger), so that even the context may fail to exclude one of two possible meanings. Yet, it is not necessary to decide which meaning is intended before the example can be understood, as follows:

A: Newcastle Brown is a jolly good beer.
B: Is it?
A: Well it ought to be at that price.

("Here it is not clear whether the speaker is referring to the maker's obligation to provide good beer (Root OUGHT), or whether he is making a logical assumption -- 'it costs a lot, therefore it is good' (Epistemic OUGHT)." (p. 17)

Preisler (1986) claims along similar lines that examples with modal verbs are often ambiguous and that "if the ambiguity is not resolved by the context, the reason is perhaps that it is not intended to" (p. 91). Here, then, we are taking the step from semantic to pragmatic. Thomas (1988) draws attention to so-called complex illocutionary acts and the communicative advantages that speakers may obtain from exploiting these. She distinguishes between **ambiguity** and **ambivalence**: with ambiguity, which is (indeed) a semantic/ grammatical term, it is normally the case that only one meaning is intended by the speaker, while with ambivalence, which operates at the pragmatic level, both speaker and addressee understand that more than one interpretation is possible. We may conclude, then, that Coates's term indeterminacy and Thomas's term ambivalence refer to the same phenomenon, which can be considered at least to some extent intentional on the part of the speaker (whereas ambiguity is unintentional).

Preisler (1986) further observes that the basic meanings of modal forms are in themselves extremely general or **context-indifferent** (emphasis added). He states that the modal verbs, for example, are semantically inexplicit and are "prone to take on overtones of interpersonal meaning which derive from the particular context in which they are used" (pp. 91, 96).

Perkins (1983) is among the first to relate modality to the functions of the utterances that are being modalized. He points out that the unified conceptual system of semantic modality interacts with contextual and pragmatic factors, so that of the utterance functions or illocutionary acts distinguished by Searle (1976), assertives appear to have a close relationship to epistemic modality and directives to deontic modality (Perkins 1983, p. 14, cf. also Palmer 1986, p. 13). However, he emphasizes that this is not a one-to-one relationship and that it is not the (semantics of a) modal auxiliary, for example, that determines the illocutionary force of an utterance. The force is entirely due to the context of utterance, as in the following example:

You may go. - can be uttered as a command
You may smoke. - can be uttered as the giving of permission

and yet in both cases the modal verb *may* would in most semantic treatments be analyzed as deontic 'permissive' *may*. Implicitly, Perkins thus draws attention to the fact that the modal verbs, for example, comparatively seldom act as illocutionary force indicating devices (or IFIDs, such as performative verbs). It is only in the

case of deontic (root) meaning that this kind of fairly straightforward form-function relationship is at all common. In most other cases, and certainly in the case of epistemic modality, this relationship is of a more complex kind.

Perkins (1983) claims that few linguists have an adequate working definition of modality at the semantic level. So far, there is also no unified definition of what might constitute modality at the level of interaction. In general terms, at the pragmatic level we are dealing with **illocutionary commitment**, i.e. with various ways of subscribing to a speech act (Lyons 1981). Notions such as **commitment/detachment** (Stubbs 1986), **modification of illocutionary force** (Holmes 1984) and **hedging** (Hübler 1983) have been used to account for the functions of a large number of surface structure categories in language, including and often focusing on expressions of epistemic modality.

In my study, I hypothesized that epistemic modality has a bearing on what Leech (1983) calls the rhetorical force of the utterance, "i.e. the meaning it conveys regarding s's adherence to rhetorical principles (e.g. how far s is being truthful, polite, ironic)" (p. 17). Epistemic modality was thus examined as a strategic device in **the Interpersonal and the Textual Rhetoric** of Leech (1983). It became apparent that rather than completely determining the illocutionary force of utterances, epistemic modality is more likely to first of all modify it in various ways, and secondly to completely ambiguate it. In this way, epistemic items may have a **strategic function** in discourse.

A systematic description of the functions of epistemic items in connected discourse is both a difficult and a time-consuming task. First of all, the very identification of epistemic items is not unproblematic, because, as we have seen, an item may be ambivalent or indeterminate even in its context of use. Furthermore, to tackle the actual functions of epistemic items, there is no suitable model of spoken discourse that could be applied on the huge number of occurrences of epistemic modality in the data. Therefore, a modified speech act approach was used as a starting-point for analysis, i.e. Searle's five basic speech act categories were applied to the data (Searle 1976). This was done in order to see whether there are any restrictions on the occurrence of epistemic modality in Searle's five act types, but also to find out whether the act categories of speech act theory are at all applicable to the analysis of epistemic expressions in continuing discourse. As will be seen, these questions are interconnected: even though when trying to decide on the speech act status of a given utterance I looked at both what preceded in the discourse and how the hearer interpreted it; that is, I looked at the utterance as part of connected discourse, it was frequently impossible to say whether I was dealing with an assertive or a directive, for example. Very often the utterance could have been either or, or in fact both. This is not very surprising if we take into account that speech act theory did not develop these act categories for the purpose of analyzing connected discourse (cf. Stubbs 1983a; 1986, pp. 8, 12 and his criticism on speech act theory). It is even less surprising in view of the fact that natural language by its very nature is often vague and indeterminate; speech acts can be deliberately or genuinely vague, and speakers cannot "really" be held accountable for what they said (Stubbs 1983a, pp. 485-486, Edmondson and House 1981, pp. 95-97).

It therefore became obvious that the speech act approach could only act as a negative frame of reference: the division into assertives, directives and commissives (these being the main types of speech acts that involved epistemic modality) was relatively unilluminating in itself and also difficult to carry out in practice. But, when going deeper into the reason why a speech act taxonomy was difficult to apply, two important functions of epistemic modality emerged that have not been commented on in earlier studies: the use of epistemic modality for saving one's own face in interaction, and, further, for manipulating and persuading one's addressee.

In a subsequent closer analysis of the data, the unit of analysis was extended into a longer stretch or sequence of discourse where a particularly threatening issue, a face-threatening act (following Brown and Levinson 1978), was brought up and discussed, and where at least a preliminary agreement was reached. I examined the occurrences and co-occurrence patterns of epistemic items in these sequences, as speakers appeared to use them in a very systematic and purposeful way to achieve various conversational goals and to produce a particular effect in the minds of their addressees. Thus, more evidence was obtained for the different types of strategic functions that epistemic modality appeared to have in interaction.

However, there are several things worth noting here. In the same way as it was difficult to assign one single speech act label to an utterance containing one or more epistemic items, it was by no means possible to assign one single function to a given occurrence of epistemic modality. Often more than one thing was achieved simultaneously. It is also a commonplace in pragmatics and discourse analysis that making judgments about the speaker's intentions can be both impossible and futile, and yet one cannot altogether avoid that when describing the functions of epistemic modality. One can make distinctions at a theoretical level into epistemic modality used to indicate genuine uncertainty and epistemic modality used as a conversation-interactional strategy, but in a given instance of use it is only possible to distinguish varying degrees to which one function is more prominent than the other. And finally, in so far as epistemic devices are used as a conversational strategy, they often function together with other strategic elements in interaction (cf. other modality markers below) and are only one strategic device among many.

EPISTEMIC MODALITY AS A STRATEGY IN INTERACTION

It is possible to distinguish three types of strategic functions that epistemic modality may have in spoken interaction: a politeness strategy, a face-saving strategy and a persuasion and manipulation strategy. Before going into these functions, however, some quantitative results from the corpus study are presented.

The first immediately obvious finding was that Finnish students used fewer tokens of epistemic modality than did native speakers of English (507 vs. 899). With both groups of subjects, epistemic items were clearly most common in assertive speech acts, the total numbers being 767 for native speakers and 451 for students. It is therefore understandable that earlier pragmatic research has concentrated almost exclusively on the use of epistemic modality in assertions (cf. Hübler 1983 for example). Correspondingly, the total numbers of epistemic devices in directives

were 132 for native speakers and 56 for students. By contrast, epistemic expressions were rare in commissive and expressive speech acts; deontic modality is indeed more typical in commissives and evaluative modality in expressives (Palmer 1986, pp. 13-14).

The most common type of epistemic devices used by native speakers of English in assertives were (in absolute numbers) the sentential adverbs, while modal auxiliaries and parentheticals/ lexical verbs were somewhat less common, but equally often used compared to each other (see Table 1).

A comparison of the findings across the two subject groups yielded certain interesting results that pointed towards epistemic modality as a truly pragmatic device, whose semantic content has perhaps been overemphasized. Table 1 shows the frequencies of representatives of epistemic modality in both subject groups, as related to the total amount of speech in each group (NSs 44,053 words, NNSs 30,961 words) to make comparison possible:

Table 1. The most frequent types of epistemic modality in NS and NNS speech (number of tokens per words spoken by subjects in each group).

Native speakers of English:		Finnish students of English:	
adverbs	0.71 %	parentheticals	0.60 %
parentheticals	0.45 %	adverbs	0.46 %
modal verbs	0.45 %	modal verbs	0.28 %
adjectives	0.13 %	adjectives	0.13 %

As can be seen in the table, the order of the two most frequent types of expressions is reversed for students, and also the relative frequencies of modal adverbs and modal verbs are smaller than those for native speakers. It is striking that the students as a whole tended to use speaker-oriented parenthetical expressions of the type *I think* and *I know* more often (relatively speaking) than native speakers. To find even clearer tendencies in the students' interlanguage, the 48 students were divided into three groups according to their linguistic competence. Table 2 shows the differences between the linguistically most competent students (Group A) and the least competent students in the corpus (Group C) as to their use of different types of epistemic devices.

Table 3 shows the relative frequencies of epistemic devices in the speech of three groups (again in relation to the total amount of speech in each group): among native speakers of English, in Group A and in Group C.

It is clear that the Finnish students of English use fewer epistemic expressions in their speech than do native speakers of English. They also seem to favour different types of epistemic devices from those used by native speakers. Even Group A uses relatively fewer modal auxiliaries than native speakers (0.38% vs. 0.45%), and resorts to parentheticals instead. Also, the students in this group use relatively fewer adverbs than native speakers (0.59% vs. 0.71%). Group C appears

Table 2. Use of epistemic devices in two student subject groups: Group A (linguistically most competent) and Group C (linguistically least competent).

Parentheticals + lexical verbs		Adverbs		Modals		Adjectives	
GROUP A (14 students):							
I think	36	really	25	might	15	sure	6
I know	11	of course	18	could	7	I'm sure	5
I suppose	4	maybe	11	'll	7	possible	3
seems	4	probably	6	won't	5	I'm not sure	1
sounds	4	perhaps	4	may	2	sure thing	1
I don't think	3	definitely	1	wouldn't	2		
I guess	1	surely	1	going to	1		
tend	1	certainly	1	gonna	1		
it seems to be	1	possibly	1	will	1		
				must	1		
				should	1		
				would	1		
total	65		68		44		16
GROUP C (10 students):							
I think	21	of course	3	'll	3	sure	7
I don't think	3	maybe	3	must	2	I'm sure	2
I suppose	3	really	2	wouldn't	2		
I guess	2	probably	2	going to	1		
seem	1	surely	2	might	1		
I know	1	perhaps	1	should	1		
		possibly	1				
		definitely	1				
total	31		15		10		9

to use parentheticals as a kind of compensatory strategy for both modal verbs and adverbs (0.74% vs. native speaker 0.45%). It is indeed a common observation in linguistic research that the English modal auxiliaries are difficult for foreign students to learn (Holmes (1982) makes this observation about French and Dutch students). That the Finnish students had difficulties with epistemic adverbs as well seems significant.

Table 3. Relative frequency of epistemic devices in NS, Group A and Group C speech.

NSs:			
adverbs 0.71%	parenth. 0.45%	modals 0.45%	adj. 0.13%
Group A:			
adverbs 0.59%	parenth. 0.56%	modals 0.38%	adj. 0.14%
Group C:			
parenth. 0.74%	adverbs 0.36%	modals 0.24%	adj. 0.22%

On-the-Record and Conventionalized Modality: A Politeness Strategy

In recent pragmatic research, several scholars have offered frameworks of politeness to account for violations of the Cooperative Principle and for indirection in language (cf. Leech 1983, Brown & Levinson 1978, Scollon & Scollon 1983, R.Lakoff 1975, Tannen 1984, Arndt & Janney 1985 and Östman 1986). What is common to these is that they deal with the modification, i.e. strengthening or weakening, of the illocutionary force of utterances. The role of epistemic modality as a politeness strategy is already fairly well established (cf. Holmes 1982, Coates 1983, Hübler 1983, Markkanen 1985, Westney 1986). My use of the term *politeness* comprises the positive and negative types of politeness in Brown and Levinson's taxonomy only.

In the present study, eight conversations were chosen for closer examination, involving complaints and possibly offers or suggestions for further measures by both native (four situations) and Finnish speakers (four situations). In the data, epistemic modality appeared to be employed by native speakers of English mainly to express on-the-record negative (or deference) politeness, or concern that the speaker shows for the hearer's right to be free from imposition. This can be seen in Example 1, where NS protests against NNS's behaviour; the Finn has again forgotten that they had had an appointment to play tennis the day before.

Possibly because NNS already hastened to apologize, NS presents not a direct but a very elaborately qualified complaint (lines 3-18) and an even more qualified suggestion (lines 18-22) to deal with the situation. There are a number of modality markers or softeners: gambits like *actually* and *you know*, vague hedges like *or something*, and fumbles like *I don't know* and *I'm just wondering*. These items are in most contexts considered to be expressive of negative or deference politeness. In addition, NS uses the epistemic expressions *might*, *really* and *maybe*. By virtue of the fact that these are low-intensity modal items, they serve to mitigate the effect of

Example 1:

(NNS has himself brought up the issue first)

NNS: (...) This is again the second time ■ er ■ already a second time er I [forgot, I'm really - I'm really sorry.
NS: Yes ■ yes that's what] I was thinking actually, [erm...
NNS: Ahh...]
NS: ... ■ I - I waited you know, half an hour or something and ■ I thought you **might** turn up. ■ [Of course I -...
NNS: And maybe...]
NS: ... I paid anyway the sixty marks for actually getting in there...
NNS: Yeah.
NS: ... so I thought I **might** as well wait for you and I - I spent half an hour and just ■ doing nothing **really**, erm ■ ((clicks tongue)) I don't [know er ■ ...
NNS: Er] ■■ you - you should be angry.
NS: Well, yes, [well...
NNS: Er...]
NS: ... I be- ((creaky voice)) ((clicks tongue)), it was irritating **obviously** at the time. I'm just wondering ■ **maybe**, you know, we should drop the idea of actually playing tennis, erm ■ if you're particularly busy er at this time and, I don't know, **maybe** start [again in a few months' time, or something.
NNS: Well these few weeks I <u>am</u>] but otherwise I - I <u>like</u> tennis and I like to pay it er - play it, I don't know how regularly but er I'm not sure ■ er. (...)

■ = pause
[ ] = overlapping speech
<u>underlining</u> = contrastive stress or emphasis

the complaint and the suggestion, and in this context indicate negative politeness. Later in the conversation NS repeats the suggestion in a slightly different form, but again qualified by a number of low-intensity epistemic items:

Example 2:

NS: Well, this is what I mean,] **I think** we should **probably**, you know, sort of give it a rest until you've finished whatever project you're [working on...
NNS: Oh...]
NS: ... and er...
NNS: Erm...
NS: ... **maybe** pick it up again...

I think, *probably* and *maybe* in this context are on-the-record and fairly conventionalized indications of politeness behaviour. These, as well as *might*, *perhaps* and *of course* are among the high-frequency items in native-speaker talk.

As for Finnish students, the numbers of types and tokens of epistemic expressions that they used for making complaints and suggestions were much lower. It is significant, however, that there were no great differences in frequencies between students and native speakers in our project corpus as regards the use of other than epistemic markers or hedges, namely those forms that are directed only at some part of the proposition, i.e. some lexical item in it. These include expressions like *a little*, *sort of*, *just*, *and things like that*, etc., which were used extensively by the students. The students were also able to use items that we labelled gambits relatively well: these refer to conversational lubricants such as *well*, *I mean*, *you know*, *as a matter of fact* etc. (The term *gambit* is understood as defined by Edmondson and House 1981: 61-65). Since these two strategic devices of conversation also have a clear politeness function, the fact that students were fairly good at using them would seem to indicate that they were aware of the politeness aspects of interaction.

Finnish students were also able to use certain types of epistemic expressions to achieve a politeness effect. Firstly, they made extensive use of the parentheticals *I think* and *I know*.[1] In the whole corpus, the former parenthetical was used more, even in absolute terms, by the students than by native speakers (NNS 101 vs. NS 91). It can be argued that the predominance of *I think* may be due to interference from the Finnish *musta (tuntuu)* 'in my opinion' or *luulen/ luulisin* 'I think/ I would think', which in turn may explain why *I think* is often used slightly unidiomatically. The Finnish equivalents are a much weightier means for expressing opinion than *I think* seems to be; *I think* seldom has full semantic content in conversational discourse (those instances where it clearly indicated thinking were left outside consideration completely). However, students may be making use of the fact that it is quite transparent semantically, i.e. it expresses an explicitly subjective view of the speaker. The link between the semantic content and the function of mitigation is thus not difficult even for a non-native speaker to infer. Also the fact that it is clause-external rather than clause-internal can perhaps make it easier to use; it does

not have to be integrated into the sentence structure and it may therefore be easier to process and give the non-native speaker more thinking time. This may be one of the reasons why students use as many as 12 different types of explicitly subjective parenthetical clauses, whereas native speakers only use 9. Secondly, the students also know how to make use of *maybe* and *perhaps* for the politeness function. These adverbs are already a very conventionalized, on-the-record strategy for attenuating the force of indirect requests and suggestions, to the point that they have been called modal particles by Lyons (1981, p. 238). It might even be argued that there is no longer anything truly strategic about them. This is then reflected in their frequency of occurrence, so that they are also part of the students' active competence.

The conclusion can perhaps be made, then, that the students are able to use epistemic items, along with other types of hedging devices, for the affective or interpersonal function when these items are either very explicit in semantic content or when they are of a relatively conventionalized or routinized kind. In any case, it appears that epistemic modality is perhaps primarily used, by native and non-native speakers alike, for the function of paying respect to the hearer's negative or personal face, or his/her need for autonomy, rather than for taking notice of the hearer's positive or interpersonal face, or his/her need for acceptance.

Off-the-Record (or On-the-Record) Modality: A Face-Saving Strategy

By *face-saving*, more narrowly than Brown and Levinson, I refer solely to the concern that the speaker feels for himself/herself and the extent to which he/she is preoccupied with and wants to pursue his/her own interests in conversation, rather than acting in a more hearer-supportive way. Another way of naming this function might be to call it something like *a leeway strategy*. It largely involves ambiguating utterances, so that it becomes very difficult to work out what their illocutionary forces are. Speakers choose to be evasive and to beat about the bush, in order to leave themselves an 'out'. They may want to go off record, or resort to hints of various types, so that the illocutionary status of the utterance remains vague and indeterminate. According to Brown and Levinson, it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act, but the speaker provides himself with a number of defensible interpretations (1978, p. 216). Thus, the speaker leaves it up to the addressee how to interpret the message, and the addressee must make some inference to be able to do this. In a lot of cases the link between the literal force and the illocutionary force of an utterance that contains a number of modal items can be almost impossible to retrieve. At the same time there may be cases where off-record strategies are used in contexts where they are unambiguously on record, i.e. the context contains so many clues that only one interpretation is in fact viable (cf. Brown and Levinson 1978, pp. 139, 217 and Leech 1983, pp. 97-99). Thus, it is the context that determines whether we are dealing with on-the-record or off-the-record language.

The occurrences of epistemic items were studied in admissions of guilt and responsibility, again in eight conversations, where speakers were likely to pay a certain amount of attention to preserving their own faces. Not surprisingly, it was

Example 3:

1 NS: So ■ about - about the car, about the scratch. It's - [it's very bad.
NNS: ((inaudible))] Well ...
NS: It needs to be rep - it does need to be repaired, **I don't know.**
[I looked at it ...
5 NNS: Yeah ((inaudible)).]
NS: ... and it didn't seem to be too serious, I mean **maybe** (well) ...
NNS: Yeah, well, that's the thing about cars. You make a
little scratch and you have to paint the whole car ha ha.
NS: Aah no, [not **really.**
10 NNS: Of course] we can er ... Perhaps we could arrange it
so that just a smaller portion of the car is painted.
NS: Small (what)? [Noo, you can only do ...
NNS: Some parts.]
NS: ... er ■ in my experience uhm (you have scratches on
15 cars) **maybe** it goes to a garage and then they ■ they
er ((inhales)) - they make the surface smooth again
and then they paint it and it's - it's not such a
big job, **I don't think.**
NNS: Yeah, [yeah ...
20 NS: It] **shouldn't** be so [expensive.
NNS: ... yeah], yeah. ■ But perhaps you - perhaps we
could find some - some small ■ small little place
where they - they [do these cheaply, you know.
NS: Uhuh.] ■ Well **I think** - (I was about) to say before
25 we go on that I **will have to** er - er pay for the
damage **maybe.** It was my fault.
NNS: Mhm.

the native speakers of English who had mastered this kind of linguistic behaviour.[2] In their speech, epistemic items tended to cluster into utterances and utterance sequences in ways that were not in line with their actual semantic content. In the following FTA sequence, the NS is putting out a great number of feelers to explore the situation.

In a very roundabout way, the NS tries to establish what the NNS's views are on the seriousness of the scratch that he has caused to his car (lines 1, 3-4, 6). This is a seemingly illogical sequence that does not really make sense if we give each (not necessarily epistemic) item its full meaning: see e.g. *It does need to be repaired, I don't know*. NS maybe expects NNS to say that he does not regard the scratch as too serious, but NNS is not very compliant. There is an even clearer example at the end of the extract (lines 24-26): NS apparently admits that he is responsible for scratching the car, and offers to pay for the damage. But the offer, *I will have to pay for the*

damage maybe, is expressed in such a qualified way in which it is difficult to say whether it is in fact an offer (and a commissive speech act) or just a speculation about future arrangements (in which case it is an assertive), even though we take into account the preceding discourse. *Will have to* and *maybe* ambiguate the illocutionary force of the utterance, so that the illocutionary point becomes vague and indeterminate.

This kind of strategic play is intentional to some extent, inviting the hearer to validate or at least to react in some way before a commitment is made. It also makes it possible for the NS later to actually withdraw his offer without losing face.

Here epistemic expressions are truly pragmatic in that their exact semantic meaning does not seem to carry all that much weight: it is possible to use two epistemic expressions with meanings directly opposite to each other inside one and the same utterance, such as *will have to* and *maybe* (one expressing certainty and the other lack of certainty). This is actually a long-established phenomenon at sentence level semantics, where, it seems to me, it has not been possible to give a good enough explanation for this phenomenon. Such co-occurrence patterns were not found in the on-the-record politeness use in my data.

Compare how a NNS, a Finnish student of English, admits that she has broken the TV set in the lounge of a student dormitory:

Example 4:

1 NS: [...] well, I'm kind of er in charge of it now and I found out that it's broken.
NNS: Yes, and I think I'm responsible for that.
...
5 NS: [...] I'm in a funny position, because I don't wanna have to pay for it myself to have it repaired.
NNS: Yes, yes. Well, it's quite clear that I have to pay, but...
NS: Uhum.
10 NNS: ... will it be a very big...?

There is no doubt about it: she admits straight away that she has broken the TV. The student, admittedly, uses *I think*, but this parenthetical is not a very efficient way of saving face, especially if the very next word, *I* (in *I'm responsible for that)*, is stressed and conveys unconditional surrender. When accepting that she has to pay for the damage, the student even stresses her commitment by *it's quite clear*, which is rather more explicit in content than, for example, *of course* and does not leave much room for the NNS to move (apparently she is only worried whether it will be a very big bill).

Other admissions of guilt or responsibility by the students included the following (the student did not actually offer to pay for the damage in any of the cases, but only agreed to what the NS suggested):

Example 5:

NNS2: Well, yeah, oh dear ■ I actually - I ■ tried to be a bit too mechanically and so I broke it I th - I'm afraid.

NNS3: And er ■ I was wondering er ■ have you grown any familiar with the er television set here because I seem to have broken it or something?

NNS4: And so I came down here last night and I putted the telly on and ■ all of a sudden it - it got stuck ■ and only the channel number one is - is ■ playing.

With NNS2, there is again no doubt about it: he is guilty, even though he uses a few modality markers or gambits to play down the effect a little (such as *actually*, *a bit* and *well*). It is striking that the student chooses a marker of emotional attitude, *I'm afraid*, which presupposes that what it refers to is true and is therefore strictly speaking not epistemic -- he clearly intended to say *I think*, which would indeed have left a little more room for him. NNS3, rarely enough, uses an epistemic device, *seem*, which together with the non-epistemic hedge *or something* takes back some of the force of the actual admission (which is nevertheless there). With NNS4, finally, we have a clever example of an off-the-record admission of guilt, where the illocutionary point of the utterance is left ambiguous -- but even here there are no epistemic devices used to achieve this effect.

The **implicitness** of epistemic modality becomes obvious in contexts like the above, where speakers are stalling with the help of these expressions. Epistemic items are capable of expressing the speaker's views and ideas implicitly and unobtrusively, so that speakers cannot be held to have committed to just one communicative intent. In line with Östman (1986), implicitness could indeed be considered an essential criterion for pragmatics (as opposed to semantics): "An implicit choice is defined as a linguistic choice that the speaker in principle can deny that s/he has made" (pp. 23-26).

The numbers of epistemic expressions used for face-saving by the students are much smaller than those used by native speakers, and the types of expressions chosen follow the same pattern as was established for the politeness use. *I think* again figures highest in the students' speech, whereas modal auxiliaries do not appear to be used much: in admissions of guilt and responsibility, a total of 9 modals was used by the students as opposed to the 66 modals used by native speakers! Similarly, there is a great gap in the frequencies of epistemic adverbs in these situations: 23 NNS instances vs. 114 NS instances.

On the basis of some recent studies on modality, it seems that it is especially epistemic modal verbs and adverbs that may convey implicit attitudes of the speaker, either subjective or objective ones (Halliday 1985, p. 333, Preisler 1986, p. 95).

Their implicitness seems to be based on the following properties. Firstly, they are quite integrated into the sentence/ utterance structure. Epistemic adverbs are more integrated into the sentence structure than are parenthetical clauses, while the modal verbs are the most highly integrated items of all. Secondly, as we have seen, especially the modal auxiliaries are frequently ambiguous at the semantic level between an epistemic and a non-epistemic (root) meaning, so that it is almost impossible to say even in context whether a certain occurrence is epistemic or not.

A conclusion may thus be drawn from the above examples that Finnish students do not seem to master the more implicit use of epistemic modality in their less conventionalized context of use. It appears that something that is conveyed as extra information, that is deniable and vague, can indeed be difficult for a learner to perceive, let alone use actively. It is not surprising, then, that students resort to a device that is explicit (in this case explicitly subjective) in nature, namely to parentheticals and especially to *I think*.

Off-the-Record Modality: A Persuasion and Manipulation Strategy

In the following, a tentative account of the use of epistemic modality to manipulate one's addressee, in order to achieve one's own conversational goals, will be presented. This type of use, already quite clearly off-the-record, relates directly to the rhetorical as opposed to the illocutionary force of an utterance. It cuts across the Textual Rhetoric and the Interpersonal Rhetoric of Leech: to some extent the rhetorical devices of written language, such as the maxims of End-weight and End-focus, or different ways of giving prominence to an item, can be used in spoken language, too. In addition, irony is a powerful device used in the service of this strategy.

Not even the very fluent students of English, or Group A in our corpus, seemed capable of using epistemic devices for the expression of irony, and what is more they had difficulty in recognizing ironic meaning. An instance of this can perhaps be seen in the following example, where NS and NNS have just had a fairly heated discussion about the tennis appointment and have decided to change their regular day for tennis:

Example 6:

NS: You're quite sure you are free ((inaudible))?
There's nothing ■ that you might have forgotten,
that's happening next Friday, the week after it?
NNS: Right.
NS: Uhm...

The NNS, who is linguistically highly competent, does not appear to recognize that the NS is being ironic, by way of being overpolite (cf. the Irony Principle, Leech 1983, p.82), when he is checking that the NNS has not forgotten any previous arrangements for Friday. It is of course also possible that the student did not miss the irony but chose to ignore it deliberately. In the case of non-native speakers it is

sometimes quite difficult to judge what is going on because of the slight unidiomaticity of their English. Here the linguistic device that the student uses to reply, *right*, would seem to indicate that he treats the NS's question as an assertion that does not require an answer but rather an acknowledgement or an indication of agreement. Where *no* would in fact be required to show agreement with a negative statement, Finnish students commonly used *yes*, and moreover they tended to overuse *right* as a kind of generalized backchannel and responding gambit. Even though it is not quite clear how the student interpreted the NS's directive, it is nevertheless obvious that directives "disguised" in the form of declarative sentences and containing one or more epistemic elements (in this case *might*) can make their force or speech act status more difficult to recognize. They are thus directives done off-the-record, and may be, lent themselves, for manipulative as well as politeness and face-saving purposes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

Why are epistemic devices so difficult for Finnish (and possibly also for other) foreign language learners to use?

It is indeed a wide-spread view that the use of the English modal verbs provides difficulties for learners. The acquisition of some of their meanings is difficult even for native speakers: Gibbs (1990, p. 297), among others, claims that 'Hypothetical and Epistemic Possibility' of the modals *can*, *could*, *may* and *might* is acquired much later than other meanings of these modals. It has been argued that a 'modality reduction' in language learners' use of English is to some extent 'teaching induced' (Holmes 1988, p. 40 quoting Kasper); most textbooks cover epistemic modality only very sporadically, if at all (Holmes 1988, p. 38). Indeed, one important reason for the lack of these expressions in the Finnish students' speech is lack of explicit teaching, which in turn is due to lack of research on their functions.

Several other reasons have been suggested. Holmes (1982) suggests that the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic modality (at the semantic level) is difficult to make in practice. Secondly, according to her, it is difficult to define the precise point on the scale of certainty expressed by a particular item. Thirdly, these linguistic forms may simultaneously convey a variety of meanings -- Holmes is here referring to the intrapersonal meaning, i.e. when the speaker is genuinely uncertain about something, and the more interpersonal meaning, i.e. of taking your hearer into consideration.

My counter-arguments to Holmes's claims are as follows. As is actually reflected by her first two comments, the teaching of epistemic modality has so far been restricted to the level of semantic meaning. It seems obvious that the interactive use of epistemic modality is in fact not so tightly connected with the semantic meaning of these items as Holmes seems to imply, and that these items can be scattered throughout an utterance and over a longer stretch of discourse according to some other principle than on the basis of their exact semantic meaning. Furthermore, it may not even be necessary, or indeed possible, to tell an epistemic use from a non-epistemic one; this distinction is an arbitrary and a theoretical one anyway,

and it is more important to learn to exploit these devices strategically. It may also not be necessary to know their exact degree of certainty, but, by contrast, students should learn that the degree of certainty that a given item may express in theory should not be taken too literally in actual interaction (cf. *will have to* and *maybe* next to each other in one and the same utterance in Example 3). Finally, it is perhaps worthwhile to point out, while teaching the use of these devices, that even though they may operate at both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, in practice they often do so simultaneously and that these uses cannot be separated in any rigid way.

In the light of the present study it may in fact be that some types of epistemic devices are difficult to acquire because they are more implicit markers of speaker-attitude, which may make their pragmatic functions more difficult to define. They can be used effectively to modify, and, as we have seen above, especially to ambiguate, any speech act, and it is here that their truly strategic nature comes out. It is especially these properties, **implicitness** and their potential for **off-the-recordness**, that are difficult to pin down and describe, or that have not been adequately described so far.

Also, these functions have not been introduced into second language teaching in any systematic way. Unless being pointed out specifically, something that is conveyed as extra information and that is deniable and vague is likely to be missed by a language learner completely. The student may then not be able to recognize that more than one interpretation is possible in the case of an utterance loaded with epistemic expressions. When speaking the language, the student may find it best to play safe and resort to devices that are quite explicit and predictable as to their interactive effect: explicitly subjective parentheticals, such as *I think*, and also other types of modality markers than epistemic ones.

How, then, could the various functions of epistemic modality in English be integrated into second language teaching?

It is perhaps inevitable that we should begin at the level of the sentence, and teach the semantics of these items first, because of the fairly distinct core meanings that they may have. We should also teach the syntactic patterns related to these meanings. But once we come to the level of discourse, and to the discourse strategies available to speakers, we should no longer aim at an atomistic description of the possible uses of one individual item, but, as Stubbs (1986) puts it:

> ... I think it is possible to show that many features of surface syntax have the function of presenting speakers' attitudes to propositions, illocutions, and words. Individual cases are, of course, widely discussed, but they are seldom if ever brought together into a unified description, in what could be called a **modal grammar** of English. (p. 20; emphasis added)

We should therefore see the manifestations of epistemic modality as one functional device among many, and as part of a large apparatus for generally making

adjustments to what we are about to say, for intrapersonal as well as interpersonal purposes. Thus, the idea of a **modal grammar** is certainly very plausible, as long as we do not expand the range of possible items endlessly. Stubbs himself tends to include almost every conceivable linguistic device in his treatment. However, certain devices are more central than others, depending on the type of discourse that we are talking about; it became evident in my study that epistemic devices are among the most common in spoken discourse, and, moreover, among the most strategic.

Once the students, at university level at the latest, are made aware of the whole range of functions that epistemic devices may have, they can, if they choose, express themselves more "fully" and subtly, at the same time allowing themselves more room to manoeuvre. But it is debatable whether these functions can actually be taught, since by definition they are so implicit and off-the-record (and context-dependent) that they almost escape description, let alone explicit teaching.

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NOTES

[1]Besides mitigation, *I think* is used quite extensively as a turn-taking gambit at the beginning of utterances, but these occurrences were not included in the present study.

[2]It might actually be argued that this strategy is more necessary in the simulated conversations of the present corpus than they would be in real conversations, because the participants have to establish some kind of common ground in a not too obvious way. This does not, however, invalidate the claim that a face-saving strategy exists and is made use of by (at least) native speakers, as long as I do not make claims about its relative frequency in a certain type of discourse.

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